

# **The women's movement needs to learn how to deal with the compelling force of religious discourse**

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## **Re-inventing strategies**

The women's movement needs to learn how to deal with the compelling force of religious discourse that is completely co-opting liberal interpretation for patriarchal ends

In 1981, Pakistani women's resistance to the Islamisation of the state under Gen Zia ul Haq was a clear, cohesive and more effective movement than ever before or arguably, since. Why is it that some 30 years later, the women of Pakistan are still facing the same challenge while poised on the cusp of another wave of Islamisation under a different title, Talibanisation?

The direction of religiosity in Pakistan has taken a turn over the last three decades. In the Zia years, the state was overtly theocratised in its attempt to institutionalise its own brand of Islam. In Nawaz Sharif's tenures, the legacy of Zia gathered democratic legitimacy, such that non-Muslims became vulnerable targets too. The phenomenon of Talibanisation is commonly associated with those who were conscientised by madrassahs to form jihadi groups and used by our state to fight the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. What was state complicity under Gen Zia, changed into a policy of renouncement under Gen Musharraf. The latter (ostensibly) sought to distance the state from Talibanisation, as a foreign imposed, militant and unenlightened religious ideology.

On the other hand, what has been neglected by activists and analysts are the internal sociological changes that have taken place simultaneously in all parts of the country. Although this is loosely called Talibanisation, the reference is to the un-named growing momentum of faith-based groups and piety movements which are more indigenous than the "foreign" imposition of the Taliban. Hence, today the challenge is not only from an overtly theocratic state that is pushing this agenda but also from fragmented, organised faith-based interest groups.

The faith-based interest groups compete for legitimacy in routine politics and for relevance in the social fabric of the country. This growing piety movement includes many women religious leaders and home-based preachers, several of whom have successfully activated networks and mobilised communities to spread the word. Often, though not always, these are purported for the cause of women's rights in Islam. What used to be the strategies and vocabulary of the liberal and upper class NGO women activists, have been claimed by these supposedly more indigenous Islamic women's rights activists. These women may not be overtly politicised as yet but certainly are involved in (what is commonly known in NGO vocabulary as) advocacy towards this end. The Jamia Hafsa incident in 2007 is simply a precursor of the potential of the personal religious agency of women being converted in to political activism.

This development is not accidental. One section of the progressive women's movement from 1991

debated the virtues of strategising and reclaiming feminist interpretations for women's rights, from the insider position, within the Islamic framework. The concept of Islamic Feminism caught the imagination of Muslim women, as they were convinced they could reclaim their divine rights by reinterpreting Islamic texts. Diasporic Muslim women (living in secular countries) were most enthused by this project. Organisations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) have entire testimonies of Muslim women as evidence of how religion could be used to reshape disadvantageous gender relationships. What they didn't account for is how such personally empowering strategies can and at some point, must be converted into political activism. Madrassah education for girls, the veil, polygamy, women leading prayers and other such matters were rethought as symbols and practices that could subvert patriarchal oppression. Just because under some circumstances, these practices took place against male wishes and invoked historical references from Muslim history, Islamic feminists considered them successful feminist strategies.

Some politicised radical Islamist women, however, wish to appropriate the same symbols and practices, not for feminist ends but to argue women's domestication or compatibility with patriarchy. They do so far more successfully because ultimately, all the above symbols represent separation, non-neutrality and unequal status for women. They are temporary and limiting strategies. Also, material issues such as equal inheritance, maintenance, custody of children and so forth are always up for negotiation rather than guaranteed unequivocal rights. Thus working from within patriarchal religion will always remain a slippery slope for women and the debate will only give more and more legitimacy to the Islamists rather than feminists.

The question of alliances too has become complicated. While women representatives in our Parliament have increased considerably due to the reserved seats, we see they are increasingly becoming symbolically and politically submissive to patriarchal norms and male leadership in the Parliament. This used to be the criticism of women in right wing political parties but today has become the accommodative behaviour of women belonging to self-acclaimed liberal secular parties. If these women disempower themselves under the patriarchal compulsions of male stream politics, what should we expect of them for social change?

Other forms of alliances are equally worrying. After the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in Nov 2008, the pressure on the Pakistani government led to a crackdown for hunting suspects believed to be part of the banned extremist religious group, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). In defence of the LeT, some 200 Hindu women in Sindh came out to protest against this state action in support of the banned terrorist organisation. They claimed that LeT supported their poor community and gave them protection and services. Importantly, these women crossed gender and religious boundaries to support those who would ordinarily be their religious antagonists. I submit, the progressive Women's Action Forum has difficulty mobilising 200 Muslim women to protest on cases of rape or violence, leave alone reaching to minority communities to support their causes. This, despite the fact, that many NGOs have been involved in service delivery and developing relationships with the communities for some 30 years now. The contention is then, that religious affiliation and empowerment from within may be completely independent of delivering or receiving rights and development (quite different from philanthropy).

Taliban may be an easier target of criticism by virtue of their overt, public and unambiguous agenda. However, the political agency of other Islamist groups and individuals has moved far beyond mere attitudes or misinterpretation of religion. Religious movements have genuine grassroots support in many cases and it is precisely through their methods of service delivery and provision of social justice that in many cases, they have successfully institutionalised their cause. This cause presupposes a social order in which women have separate but not equal rights and are subject to moral regulations not applicable to men.

It remains for the liberal progressives to either confront and challenge such structural take-over through convincing alternatives or be absorbed by this larger force. Anything in between, such as reinterpreting religion and using cultural/religious practices as tools for empowerment is likely to fail or merely be co-opted by the very sophisticated and nuanced Islamist movement which includes women within such movements.

The recent Lawyers' Movement for the restoration of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry has many lessons for civil society and the women's movement in particular. First, it has been the single largest, sustained and successful, non faith-based movement this country has witnessed in a very long time. The right wing support to it was an appendage, not the driving engine by any means. The Lawyers' Movement was also not concerned about any policy reform or whether a liberal, democratically elected government was in power or indeed, about giving up agency to the parliamentary process for interpreting correctives to the Constitution. Instead, the agenda of the Movement was always about a structural corrective and an institutional balance of power. They achieved this, symbolically and in practice and it has become a milestone for restoring street activism and reviving a fledgling civil society.

The women's movement has lessons to learn about the limitations of civil society and the need to rethink its politics, strategies and alliances on how to deal with the compelling force of religious discourse that is completely co-opting liberal interpretation for patriarchal ends. Ironically, secular resistance may be the only realistic strategy to prevent the very subversion of the traditional approach used by women activists who were seeking rights from within religion.

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